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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, credit-by-examination was promoted as a way to broaden access to college. In 1971, Ewald Nyquist, Commissioner of Education in the Regents system of New York, proposed that the Educational Testing Service offer a degree based entirely on performance on examinations. Although a few institutions theoretically offer such degrees, in practice very few students would ever find sufficient course coverage to meet the requirements for their intended degree by taking and passing examinations. The promising prospects for credit-by-examination in the 1960s proved difficult to realize. The College Level Examination Program, the largest program, showed declining annual "enrollment" from 1975 to 1990. Other test services also showed declines in numbers of persons taking tests for college credit after a surge in military personnel took the tests in the 1970s following the Vietnam War. Only American College Testing's Proficiency Examination Program, which focused on registered nurses who needed bachelor's degrees, showed increased numbers of test-takers. This program may foreshadow the future uses of credit by examination, which may target the increasingly diverse educational needs of students returning for further education. The testing programs will need to examine ways to help students prepare for the examinations in conjunction with colleges. (KC)

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Credit-by-examination is a concept with a long history. The present dominance in American education of credit for participation in courses essentially obscures the prior role of such examinations in a day when the routes to knowledge were more private, the time for preparation less structured. The University of London, for example, was begun in 1836, and it offered no classroom courses; it was not a teaching institution, but an examining one. The beginnings have endured, and the University still recognizes so-called "external" candidates, whose degrees are conferred on them on the basis of their performance on examinations.

Thus, the most accurate language for the concept today would be credit-by-examination only, reflecting the fact that credit is awarded for a successful, meets-the-criterion performance regardless of what manner of preparation was used. In the conventional instructional setting, there is a requirement that there be a demonstration of specific acts of preparation through the completion of a course...by which is ordinarily meant a structured set of class meetings. It is almost unthinkable, in this setting, to establish credit based on examination performance only. A college student who took the final in a course he or she had not attended would not receive credit for this course even if he or she scored a perfect paper, far superior to the performances of the students who <u>did</u> attend. Nor could students win credit for performances on the examinations of other instructors who teach other sections of the same course.

There are many practical reasons for the emphasis on coursework in modern America. The first of these is rooted in the need to standardize the meaning of a college education. As the country expanded Westward, as the population soared, as mobility increased and as access to college increased, there was a need to insure that the degrees granted by a set of more than 2,000 institutions of higher education had some measure of comparability...that the college graduate, as a product, had roughly the same characteristics regardless of where educated.

The second reason is rooted in the definition of the college experience as a maturational step. The college experience for most of the ordinary age group of college students goes well beyond the coursework. The experience socializes, teaches responsibility and initiative, and permits the leisure for reflective thought that is felt to foster a more mature and well-rounded individual. One of the reasons that people would be unhappy with a nineteen-year-old person who sought to win the degree by taking about 40 examinations successfully some June would be a feeling that this person had missed something developmental and valuable that is contained in a college experience but not reflected in the examinations.

Each of these two major rationales for course-based degrees is pragmatic, and each is anchored in reality. But the most fundamental reason for the emergence of the coursework model is that it structures not only the educations of the students but the working life of the institutions and their

faculties. The course is the unit for the workload of the professors; it is the unit for the charges of tuition. In a world of economics that is all too frequently modulated by the number of "full time equivalents," it is difficult to assimilate students who do not generate defined work for the professor, defined services for the institution.

Credit-by-examination figured in a major way in the idealistic thinking of the 1960s concerning access to college education for adults, by which is meant persons engaged in the work force at ages beyond the 18-23 range that is the stereotypical college student. In fact, Ewald Nyquist, Commissioner of Education in the Regents system of the State of New York proposed in 1971 that Educational Testing Service offer a degree based entirely on performance on a battery of examinations. This thinking was undoubtedly influenced by the early success of the College Board's College Level Examination Program (CLEP), which had been introduced in 1967. ETS made the examinations for the CLEP program. Nyquist's vision was never implemented, but very shortly thereafter more complex institutions, such as Regents College in New York, and Thomas Edison State College, in New Jersey, were started. These institutions are faithful to the vision of Nyquist, and it is at least theoretically possible to win a degree from them solely by a demonstration of success in the taking of credit-by-examination offerings.

The word "theoretically" is inserted above because, while such institutions have policies that would permit the award of a degree for attainment based only on a battery of examinations, in point of fact there are ordinarily not enough examinations to satisfy all of the complex criteria, such as a balanced allocation of coursework across various fields and levels, that govern the assembly of credit into a successful degree program. Almost all credit-by-examination programs stress the introductory level coursework. Only a very few students would ever find sufficient course coverage to meet the requirements for their intended degree simply by taking and passing examinations. The present major offerings of the three major national testing programs are classified in Table 1 as to their academic level, corresponding approximately to their expected occurrence in a four-year college sequence, from Freshman to Senior.

Table 1

Academic Level of Tests Offered by Credit-by-Examination Testing Programs

	Program				
Level	CLEP	DANTES	ACT-PEP	TECEP	Total
Freshman	45	21	6	17	89
Sophomore	11	5	6	5	27
Junior	2	7	10	28	47
Senior	-	1	4	7	12
Total	58	34	26	57	175

The promising prospects for credit-by-examination in the '60s proved difficult to realize. CLEP, the largest program, showed declining annual "enrollments" over the interval from about 1975 to 1990. No authoritative volume data are readily available from ETS or the College Board, the program's sponsors, (Swift, 1991), but the following partial table may be created from annual summary data provided in the annual reports of ETS and the College Board:

Table 2

Annual Volume Estimates of Test Takers and Tests
CLEP Program 1974-1987
(Source: Annual Reports of ETS and College Board)

	Test Takers			Tests		
Year	Civilian	Military	Combined	Civilian	Military	Combined
1974-75	100,000			280,000		
1975-76						251,000
1976-77	93,000			240,000	151,000	391,000
1977-78						358,000
1978-79						295,000
1979-80	93,000	45,000	138,000			266,000
1980-81				117,000	130,000	247,000
1981-82				100,000	122,000	222,000
1982-83				92,000	102,000	194,000
1983-84						
1984-85						
1985-86						
1986-87				99,000	74,000	173,000
1987-88						
1988-89	52,000			62,000		

These figures must be interpreted cautiously, given the failure to have access to program-validated data. There are clear problems with these annual reports as data sources: for example, the 1982-83 College Board report refers to "more than 230 million CLEP examinations," at its page 10. This would be heady stuff, indeed. More disturbingly, even if interpreted as a typographical error in a reference to 230 thousand tests, it is inconsistent with other sources of published data, exceeding the 194,000 used on Table 2.

But, clearly, there has been an enormous decline. The 1974-75 ETS Annual Report referred to the "rapid expansion of CLEP in the last few years" (at page 18). There was continued expansion of a sort as the military testing contracts were undertaken in the mid-1970s. But since then it has been apparently all downhill. Briefly, in the College Board's annual report for 1983, there was a note of optimism: "During 1982-83 volumes for the CLEP General and Subject examinations stabilized...a 3-year decline appeared to be halted." Alas, not so. The numbers of civilian test takers are about half what they were in the mid-1970s; the number of tests taken by civilians is less than a quarter of what was then taken. This is not the dream of those like Nyquist and Gardner who called for a CLEP program in the early days.

While these changes are to be attributed to a complex pattern of facts, one of the major factors inhibiting the growth of credit-by-examination has been the difficulty that people encounter in achieving the level of self-direction that is needed for this avenue to credit. The world of instructor-directed coursework is the familiar pattern, and, while it requires an ability to conform to the scheduled demands of course attendance and related work, it offers opportunities for stimulation and feedback that are not possible in the lonely environment of self-preparation. There are common uncertainties in both approaches, self-study or instructed classwork; common concerns that the investment of time and effort may not be successful, that the course or examination may not be passed. The anxieties that this produces, however, are for many persons more easily born in the more social environment of the instructed classroom.

Little has been done to develop services for the independent learner that would ameliorate some of these problems of isolation. The major reasons for this lie in the nature of the sponsorship of the major national testing programs (CLEP, ACT-PEP, DANTES) and in the inertial resistance within institutions that derives from the awkwardness of articulating independent study to the more usual instructed approach.

The sponsorship of the major national testing programs is by independent national testing organizations: ETS/College Board (CLEP), American College Testing Program (PEP), or the military, (DANTES). The examinations are marketed to colleges and universities as defined products. The act of the college or university is basically to accept or not accept. Thus, a CLEP program on the typical campus involves the establishing of a number of policies and procedures relating to the program. There may be testing officers, empowered to administer the tests; there may be testing facilities, where the tests are given; there may be established cut-scores, as stipulated policy for the award of credit; there may be institutional application procedures, by means of which the student can formally indicate a wish to attempt credit in this manner. All of these require some institutional effort. Conspicuously absent, however, in the ordinary pattern of events will be any involvement by the institution in the definition of the content of the examination or in acts of preparation by the student.

Neither the instructional institutions nor the program sponsors are well-placed to offer assistance to the student. The institution, as mentioned above, has a built-in ambivalence concerning the whole concept, by virtue of the pragmatic importance of the full-time equivalent to much economic planning, and the failure of the credit-by-examination activity to articulate well with FTE-based planning. The most appropriate source of development for independent learning strategies would be the institution's faculty...but this group is not likely to foster preparations that diminish the numbers of students who attended instructed courses. Further, in the ordinary instructional context, the professor has the power to define the course in ways that conform to or express his or her educational values. If the task is assisting independent learners to prepare for CLEP examinations, the hypothetical course to which the examination relates is defined by the test sponsor, not the professor. This diminishment of authority combines with an awareness that the activity will not generate enrollments in classes to dampen faculty enthusiasm for the enterprise.

The sponsoring agency is not well-placed to offer preparation strategies for reasons that have related dynamics. The sponsoring agencies early recognized that they would be an external force, impacting upon the institution, and hence resisted and perhaps resented as an external threat. They have contented themselves with defining a hypothetical course and related examination, but they have not advocated institutional support of the would-be learner. They offer minimal assistance in preparation. The principal forms of assistance are 1) a statement of the content specifications, usually expressed in quite general terms, that have governed the assembly of the examination; 2) the provision of a list of textbooks that may appropriately be used in self-study preparation; and 3) the provision of a set of sample questions, similar to those that appear on the examination itself, to provide the student with some sense of what the material is like. The answers to these sample materials are also usually provided, if the questions are multiple-choice. Occasionally, model, evaluated essay responses are provided.

Little research has been done on strategies that students use to prepare. A confounding factor is the relevance of the variety of prior life experiences that students have. Some students have had on the job occupational training, in a corporate or military context, that provides a substantial framework of previously-learned material on which to build to the level of understanding required by the examination. There is often a convenient assumption that a substantial block of students has such previously-learned background, and that, accordingly, the need for learning assistance is greatly reduced, obviating the need for either sponsoring agency or institution to provide it.

With the emergence of video cassette technology, there has been an expansion of course-preparation offerings in this medium. Notable video-test linkages have been established between coursework offered by the Annenberg project (with taped material that is often offered as public television broadcasts) and tests offered by the DANTES program. However, the DANTES experience indicates that there is a danger that students expect a viewing of the tapes to be a sufficient preparation for the examination, an assumption that is not mirrored in reality. (DANTES, 1991). The textbook designated for these courses is still the main vehicle for preparation, and students are merely assisted in preparation by the tapes.

The DANTES experience with these videocassettes instances some of the problems encountered in trying to offer self-directed learners materials to assist them. The materials may be misunderstood or misused. There is no active mentor or instructor to help the independent learner avoid errors. While it is true that adequate preparation materials are conspicuous by their absence, it has not been demonstrated that the deficit will be easily corrected, or that the best model will emphasize materials only. There may be a need to provide student access to learning consultants as well as to expanded materials. This of course reduces the amount of self-direction, and diminishes some of the advantages of independent study, introducing the need to stay in contact with or report to a learning consultant. On the other hand, there is little research to show the proportion of would-be learners who might actually prefer this model. Many independent learners are driven to this status by necessity, by an inability to conform to the requirements of traditional instructed campuses. They might in fact welcome an opportunity to review their learning plans with a learning consultant.

The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing prepared jointly by APA-AERA-NCME do not offer any framework that would indicate that either the institution or the sponsoring agency should undertake to assist the learner, or what might constitute a reasonable amount of assistance if tendered. The Standards do have a section on test-takers' rights (Standards, 1985, at 16.1 to 16.10), but it is nowhere asserted that in the context of credit-by-examination the candidates have the right to anything more than has been traditionally provided to them.

There are a number of sections in the Standards that related to specialized testing situations, such as counseling, employment testing, or occupational licensure. Analogous special sections consider the problems of testing special populations, such as the handicapped or nonnative speakers of a language. It is likely that there are a sufficient number of special factors relating to the independent learner and credit-by-examination that a special section in future versions of the Standards could be developed.

One feature of credit-by-examination that deserves special attention is reporting practices. Because a positive outcome of a testing can lead to an award of credit, the reporting of test results in some ways intersects with the transcripting of credit. The ordinary practice in the transcripting of credit for coursework attempted is to record even a negative outcome, such as the failure of a course. The failure of a test, however, is often treated differently, so that the test may be attempted a number of times and only the eventual success and its resultant credit transcripted. The practice seems sensible, in view of the institutional separation from the preparation strategies of the student. However, in the event of expanded involvement by the institution, the practice might be modified. There is little reason to retain a distinction or difference between credit-by-examination outcomes and instructed-classwork outcomes. Of course, the case can be made that the practice of transcripting failures in coursework is inappropriate. (Crawford, 1991).

The general decline in annual volumes reported over the interval 1970 to 1985 was not experienced by ACT-PEP. In fact, annual volumes for this smaller and somewhat specialized set of offerings actually increased by approximately 225% during the interval from 1976 to 1990. (Lutz, 1991). The specialization consists of a focus on the the needs for assessment in professional nursing. As a national shortage of nurses took shape, and as baccalaureate-level training became the norm, the needs exceeded the capacity of the nation's conventional, college-based programs to graduate students. Alternate, nontraditional programs have been strongly supported, and in this context the usefulness of the nursing-oriented testing program is assured.

It is difficult to establish the intra-institutional patterns that undergird the striking decline in CLEP volumes. CLEP rhetoric in a sense exceeds CLEP practice. It is not easy, in some cases, for a student to arrange for and complete CLEP testing; it is an activity that is described in the catalog but only half-heartedly implemented on the campus. Whether this is good or bad is debatable. It is the reality. The CLEP concept, to date, has been an awkward one to marry to the conventional college undergraduate education. A twilight has descended over credit-by-examination in this context.

The experience of ACT-PEP indicates one aspect of the future possibilities for credit-by-examination. These programs will be extremely useful in facilitating areas of educational need which the conventional campuses either can not or will not move to satisfy. The original concept, from the University of London onward, was that of an alternate route to a conventional degree; the future seems most promising in areas where the student will pursue an "unconventional" degree.

Such degrees seem likely to emerge. As society expands its knowledge and the complexity of its organizations, people will need to be certified and recertified for a number of roles across a lifetime. The buzzword goal of "lifelong learning" will become a reality. But each such certification or recertification cannot efficiently require a return to a conventional program. As in the case of nursing, a greater reliance on credit-by-examination will emerge.

The nature and content of examination programs will need to shift, also. Unlike the present model, in which preparation strategy is essentially a stepchild, minimally communicated to the student, models for quasi-independent learning will be introduced, models which offer more expansive resources to the learner, and the involvement of institutional staff in the guidance of the learning. The function of the examination in this context will be more closely integrated with the ongoing work of the college or university than is presently the case, and freer of some of the inimical perceptions that impede its applications today.

The original conception of credit-by-examination was predicated upon ideals such as the following:

> Full and effective use of all educational resources is a worthy educational and social goal. Achieving this goal will depend to a large extent on providing equitable recognition for <u>extra-institutional</u> learning.
>
> American Council on Education reported in College Board, (1979) at page 10, emphasis added.

The significant language is underlined: <u>extra-institutional</u>. This framework has continued to the present. But the credit-by-examination of the future will not ordinarily assess fully <u>extra</u>-institutional learning. Instead, the learning will be more nearly <u>quasi</u>-institutional, emerging from a relationship between learner and institution that is both closer and more complex than the present model envisions. The institution will share in the responsibility for the design and adequacy of the learning. The learner will draw upon a broader array of institutionally-sponsored services. These services will be nontraditional. There will, in a sense, be nontraditional teaching to foster nontraditional learning, in a manner that is conspicuous by its absence on the present scene.

This vision is a vision that leaves much of the present framework of conventional college and university education fully intact. The forces that presently impede a fuller application of credit-by-examination in these

contexts are not seen as vanishing. Rather, as the total educational effort expands, as lifelong learning becomes a national reality, the forms of the expanded activity are seen as differing from those of the present, conventional educations, and it is in this different context that credit-by-examination is seen as winning new vitality. Just as the ACT-PEP program is able to report increasing annual volumes in an era of general decline, by virtue of a service that does not threaten or diminish the activity of the conventional institutions, so the future credit-by-examination programs will build upon the provision of service in newer contexts. This development will strengthen both the practice of credit-by-examination and the development of lifelong learning.

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